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THE DOUBTING CHRISTIAN ENCOURAGED.

BY THE LATE

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THE
DOUBTING CHRISTIAN ENCOURAGED.

ST. MARK, IX, 24.

"And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, *I believe; help thou mine unbelief.*"

These words of the text are a part of a very interesting portion of the New Testament, and are well calculated to affect us with the liveliest sensibility. "And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; and wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out, and they could not. He answereth and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? Bring him unto me. And they brought him unto him; and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tear him, and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming. And he asked his father, how long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, of a child. And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him; but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us and help us. And Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out and said with tears, *Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.*" There is something very affecting in the word of the father of the afflicted child. He was in a most painful struggle between hope and fear:—anxiously solicitous for relief of his poor unfortunate child; he felt his fearful responsibility when told that the recovery of the child depended upon the strength of his own faith. Although he was conscious of having faith in the power of the Saviour to heal diseases in general; yet there were circumstances in the case of his own child which excited his fears. The disciples had tried to heal his child, and had failed—and it might be that the efforts of the Saviour himself would prove equally unavailing. No wonder, then,

that the tender heart of the father, sought relief in tears, and that he should utter the pathetic exclamation of the text, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." As much as to say, "Lord, I do wish to believe—I do try to believe—I think, indeed, that I do believe: yet I must confess that I have many doubts and fears; I am not certain that my faith is sincere; I may, after all, be deceived; Lord wilt thou be pleased to have mercy on my weakness, and help me to believe, and heal my poor child, notwithstanding all the defects of my faith."

In these words of the father of the child we see the exercise of weak and doubting believers in the present day. There are multitudes ready to exclaim, and even sometimes with tears, "Lord, we believe, help thou our unbelief." In speaking from these words of the text, we will enquire into some of the causes of a weak and a doubting faith among believers. For it is obvious that a large number of professors are laboring under a heavy burden of doubts and fears—that their spiritual prospects are often confused and overclouded, and that the calmness of a settled and prevailing peace is a stranger to their bosoms. It is true that in many cases these doubts and fears proceed from neglect of duty, from the consciousness of transgressions, from worldly-mindedness, and from not attending upon the ordinances of the gospel. In all such cases it is right and proper that professors should be distressed with doubts and fears; it is a mercy that they are so; these doubts and fears may be the means of their safety, the way by which they are to be brought to self-examination, to repentance and reformation. Sad, indeed, would it be for such persons to be crying peace, peace, when the scriptures and their own consciences tell them "there is no peace." But yet there are numbers of humble, sincere, conscientious and tender-hearted professors who are often distressed with doubts and fears, and all proceeding from the want of a clear view of the doctrines of the gospel. It will therefore be the object of the present remarks, to inquire why such persons are laboring under a weak and doubting faith.

1. *Some persons confound faith with assurance, and think they cannot have a saving faith unless they are certain of being converted and accepted.* Some persons there are, who tell you that they do wish to believe, that they are willing to go to the Lord Jesus Christ, and put all their trust and confidence in his merits and mercy. But they are afraid that Christ will not receive them; they feel as though it

would be presumption in them to claim an interest in his salvation ; that although they do sometimes cherish a hope in the Saviour, yet they neither know the time nor the place of their conversion ; that they are not certain they have the witness of the Holy Spirit, nor that God has pardoned their sins. Now, to these very common difficulties, experienced by humble and serious inquirers, we would say that faith is a different thing from *assurance*—from a *certain confidence* of being converted. Persons may be very confident of being converted—may think to have an assurance of the pardon of their sins, and yet have no true saving faith, no vital religion. Indeed, it sometimes happens that those who have the most confidence and assurance, have the least claims to true evangelical faith.

Faith is a looking to Christ, is an humble trusting in Christ, an acceptance of Christ : it is a belief in the word and promise and power of Christ ; it is submission to his laws : it is the resting upon Christ of one's whole hope of mercy and salvation ; it is the embracing of Christ as he is set forth in the gospel, as the way, the truth, and the life. But all this has nothing to do with a confidence that we are converted, with an assurance that we are accepted. For example, when the eunuch, after listening to the preaching of Philip, inquired to know "if he might not be baptised," or in other words make a profession of religion, Philip answered, "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest ;" to which the eunuch replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God ;" or in other words, "I accept the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour of sinners. I accede to the terms of salvation, as laid down in the gospel ; I put my whole trust and confidence in God's mercy, through Jesus Christ, and I am now willing to give the required sign of my faith through the Sacraments of the Church." Whereupon Philip immediately baptized him, and received him into the Church of Christ. Again, when the frightened jailor asked the apostles Paul and Silas, "what he must do to be saved," they did not tell him he could not be saved unless he was confident of being pardoned and converted, that he must be certain his sins were forgiven him : but they told him, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." They taught him to look to Jesus, to accept him as a Savior, to put his whole trust and confidence in his merits and mercy. If the jailor would do this in sincerity, and certify his faith through the Sacraments of the Church, the apostles knew that he would be saved ; not

because of any confidence or assurance derived from his feelings, or notions or impressions · but because of *the promise of God's mercy contained in the gospel.* As to the doctrine sometimes taught, that we cannot be christians unless we know the time and place of our conversion. we would remark, that according to this standard of judging. we cannot know that we are alive, unless we can remember the time and place of our natural birth ; that where this evidence is wanting, we are dead, and have never been born though we can eat and drink, and move, and work, and perform all the other functions and offices of life. And as regards the witness of the Holy Spirit, we must determine that important fact, not from any glow or excitement, or transport of feeling, not from notion, or fancy, or impression fastening itself upon the mind, but by calmly comparing our exercises, views, feelings, hopes, desires, and conduct, with the word of God as revealed in the gospel. The written word of the gospel is the formal, official testimony of the Holy Spirit spread upon record ; and in order that we may know that we are under the guidance and teaching of that same Spirit, we must compare ourselves, our exercises and conduct with the written word. In this way we may ascertain, not from whim, or fancy, or transports, but from scripture, experience, and plain common sense, whether we have the Holy Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are the children of God.

2. *Some persons labor under doubts and fears from misapprehending the whole plan of gospel salvation.* Being awakened to a knowledge of the truth, seeing themselves to be poor miserable, guilty sinners, these persons are afraid to go to Christ, and to trust in him for mercy. Most gladly, indeed, would they go to Christ, and embrace him as their own friend and Saviour ; but they dare not, they feel too unworthy. they are not good enough. The piteous cry of each one of them is, "Lord, I believe that thou art merciful, and willing to save others, but I am afraid I am so wicked and vile, that there is no mercy for me. My sins press heavily upon me ; and peace and comfort are strangers to my bosom. Others may have hope, and peace and joy, but with me all is darkness, and doubt, and fear. In the words of the hymn,

> "I hear, but seem to hear in vain.
> Insensible as steel;
> If aught is felt, 'tis only pain
> To find I cannot feel."

Now, with these persons, the great difficulty is, that they endeavor to *justify* themselves, and to become righteous before they go to Christ, and make a profession of their faith through the appointed Ordinances of the Church. They forget the great doctrine of the gospel, that "Christ came to save sinners," "to seek and to save that which was lost," "to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance," "to invite not the self-righteous, but the poor in spirit, the weary and heavy laden to come unto him." Christ has the robes of salvation; and instead of sewing up fig leaves to make to themselves garments, they must go NAKED to Christ, and be clothed of him in the robes of righteousness. They must not wait to be filled, but must go hungry, yea, *starving*, and be fed from the bountiful stores of Christ's table. They must not wait to become clean, but as leprous, polluted and unclean, they must go to Christ, and be washed in the purifying blood of the Lamb. They must not hope to justify themselves by any efforts or services, but they must go as guilty sinners, and be forgiven all their sins; freely, because of the atonement and intercession of the Lord Jesus Christ. These persons will never go to Christ, if they wait till they become fit, worthy, good enough; if they delay till they have repented enough, and believed enough, and been humbled enough to recommend them to the favor of Christ, and to justify them in the sight of God; if they hope to find in themselves any reasons by which they may think themselves entitled to claim the mercy of God. We repeat it, therefore, these persons must go to Christ as sinners, poor, lost, ruined sinners. They must give themselves up to God through the Ordinances and Sacraments of his Church, with a full consciousness of being altogether unworthy: they must place their whole trust and confidence in the righteousness and merits, and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. In this way the painful conflict in their breasts will be terminated, the burden of guilt will be removed; and as they humbly repose upon the simple but sure promise of God's mercy in Christ Jesus, the dark clouds will be dispersed from their spiritual horison, and hope, and peace, and comfort will be felt in their souls.

3. Another reason why persons labor under doubts and fears, is, *because they overlook one of the great objects of gospel evelation, which was to certify us of God's good will to men.* These persons think they are to determine whether God is willing to have mercy upon them by some strange, unnatural feeling, by some peculiar manifestation, by some

extraordinary impression upon their minds, by some special inward revelation of God's grace and pardon. They say they do believe, at least they try to believe, they are willing to go to Christ as poor lost sinners, they do give up and put their whole dependence in the merits of the Saviour; but yet with them all is darkness, and doubt, and fear. No light of hope cheers their dreary prospects, no voice of mercy greets their anxious ears, no evidence from on high has been received that their sins have been forgiven, that they have been accepted of God, and that Jesus Christ is their individual friend, their present Saviour. The mournful cry of each one of them is this, "Oh that I could *know*, could be *certain* that God was willing to have mercy upon *me*, that Jesus Christ died for *me*, that my sins were *now* pardoned, and that I might call Jesus Christ *'my Lord*, and *my God*." Now the difficulty with these persons is this; they disregard the settled testimony of God's word and institutions, the plain simple purpose of the gospel revelation, and look for an extraneous evidence which is vague and indefinite, an evidence which can be subjected to no fixed rules of examination, but which depends on frames and feelings, upon impulses and fancies; in a word, they overlook the evidence which God has established, and seek after that which man imagines or invents. Now, if it is by our frames and feelings alone that we are to determine God's purposes towards us, if this is the only sure evidence by which we are to determine whether or not God pardons our sins, of what benefit is the gospel—of what use are the institutions and Sacraments of the Church? If it is yet to be left to our frames and feelings, to individual illumination, to determine the momentous question of God's willingness to save sinners, then indeed the gospel was given in vain, and the angels of heaven were mistaken, when regarding the birth of the Saviour as the great, conclusive, and standing evidence of God's merciful purposes towards men, they exclaimed, "glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will towards men." If it is to be left to our feelings and impulses alone to ascertain our adoption and acceptance, how are we to ascertain these feelings, how to distinguish the true from the false, the workings of the spirit from the conceits of the imagination? Or are we, without consulting the written word of the gospel, to take it for granted that these impulses and feelings are the direct witness of the Holy Spirit? If so, if there is no definite standard by which these feelings are to be tried, then all

this boasted assurance derived alone from this source is but a blind leap in the dark, and is no assurance at all. Brethren, the great question whether God is willing to have mercy upon a sinner, is too important, too momentous to be left to any frames or feelings of mortals. It was the express object of the gospel revalation to certify us of God's willingness to save sinners, it was in order to place that blessed truth beyond all doubt and controversy, that the Lord Jesus Christ lived, and taught, and suffered, and died, and rose again. It was for this purpose that a Church with its Sacraments was established, and that a living ministry was instituted to go abroad and proclaim the glad tidings of salvation, to stand before men face to face, and as they rise up in successive generations to tell them the good news that God is willing to save sinners. Wherefore, since God has given us the inspired word of his gospel, and therein made known to us the revelation of his will, it is now our duty and privilege to be guided by the gospel as a sure and infalliable standard. By the gospel we are to determine whether we repent of sin, whether we are willing to accept the pardoning mercy of God, whether we are ready to accede to the terms of salvation, and whether we have "the Holy Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are the children of God." In the gospel, God makes known his will unto men, in the gospel the terms of salvation are plainly laid down, therein the marks and evidences of conversion and adoption are clearly specified, and all the fruits of the Holy Spirit distinctly enumerated. It is therefore by the gospel that we are to test the exercises of our hearts, our frames and feelings, and thus ascertain, in a clear and satisfactory manner, "whether we are born of the Spirit," and "are become new creatures in Christ Jesus."

4. *Some persons are filled with doubts and fears because of an injudicious comparison of their own religious exercises with the exercises of others.* They see others strong in the faith, cheerful and happy in the enjoyment of religious comforts, apparently growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ; whilst they themselves are weak and feeble, full of doubts and fears, and groaning under a burden of sin and corruption. They, therefore become discouraged, they sink down in despondency, and often-times conclude that they know nothing of religion, and "are aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, having no hope and without God in the world." Now these persons do not consider that though

"there is the same Spirit, there is a diversity of operations:" that some have one gift of the Spirit, and some another, and that always each one has something peculiar to himself. They should remember that all have their trials and difficulties, their doubts and fears, their temptations and besetting sins, their days of darkness and desertion; and that those who now seem so much to abound in faith and hope and comfort, may ere long be weeping over the desolation of their spiritual prospects, and in the bitterness of their hearts may be asking "if the Lord has forgotten to be gracious, and if his mercy is clean gone forever?" These persons should remember that though they find in their hearts, so much sin and corruption, and think that surely none can be so unworthy as they; yet that all have to complain of the plague of their hearts, and to confess and bewail their infirmities and sinfulness in the sight of heaven. It was the complaint even of an apostle, that when "he would do good, he found evil was present;" "that though he delighted in the law of God after the inward man," yet he saw another law in his members, warring against the law of his mind, and bringing him into captivity to the law of sin in his members." But in this state of mind, what was the resource of the apostle? to whom did he look for deliverance "from this body of death?" Hear him in his own words, "I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." The apostles hope was in Christ Jesus, and *in him alone;* he *rested simply upon the cross.* And here too must be placed the hopes of all believers; the strong as well as the weak. They must look to Jesus Christ. from first to last they must go as sinners to the cross of Christ, and all their hopes of acceptance with God, and of happiness in heaven, must rest upon no merits nor works of their own, but altogether upon God's mercy, vouchsafed to sinners through the Lord Jesus Christ. The great anchor-hope of the Christian is this, "That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." To this he clings through all the doubts and fears and trials of his toilsome pilgrimage; and in his fearful struggle with his last enemy, it is this that sustains his soul, and giving him the victory, enables him to depart with the song of triumph on his lips.

5. *The great importance of the interest at stake, has a natural tendency to produce, in some persons, agitation, fearfulness and alarm.* Some persons from constitutional temperament are prone to look on the dark and unfavorable side of objects; they are predisposed to melancholy

forebodings, and seek morbid gratifications in creating and cherishing a crowd of imaginary fears and evils. Now when persons of this constitutional tendency become interested in the momentous truths of religion, and when they find in themselves, after all their efforts, so much sin and corruption, they very naturally give way to sadness and melancholy, and ask if it is possible that such as they can be Christians; they think that they must be strangers to the converting and sanctifying power of grace, and that it it is but the mockery, the profanation of holy things, for them to claim to be the followers of the Saviour. And even where there is no peculiar constitutional tendency to melancholy, the very magnitude of the interests involved will cause in many persons, apprehension, anxiety and agitation. The startling question will sometimes press itself into notice, "what, if they should be deceived?" What if after all their profession of religion before men, they should at last become cast away from the presence of God, and instead of gaining the joys of heaven, should be sentenced to endure the torments of hell?" Being sincerely honest in their religious purposes, and utterly abhorring all manner of hypocracy, such persons often become greatly distressed and alarmed, when they find in themselves so many repeated and melancholy proofs "that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked." The sad complaint of each one is this, "Lord, I sometimes believe, or rather hope that I am a Christian, that I am converted and become a new man in Christ Jesus. I do know it is my wish, my earnest prayer and effort to be a Christian; and that I would not willingly appear before men to be what I am not in the sight of God; but alas! I have a heart so wicked, and I so often fall into sin and grieve the Holy Spirit, that I am awfully afraid I am yet a stranger to the sanctifying power of grace." "Search me, Oh! God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." "Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me." Now to such persons we would say, that those who have the deepest religious feelings, are sometimes most doubtful of their religious attainments: that where there is much grace, there is commonly the most humility; that a weak faith may be as sincere and saving as a strong one; that these doubts and fears are incentives

to duty and watchfulness, and barriers against sins and temptations; that those who have the least confidence and make the least pretentions are oftentimes the most faithful in duty and the most persevering in well-doing; and that thus it is with believers in general, sometimes in hope, and sometimes in fear; yet, by the grace of God, constantly pressing onward, through manifold trials, temptations and difficulties, and notwithstanding all their discouragements, defeats and falls, successfully reaching the kingdom of heaven, and ultimately gaining a crown of life. It should be remembered, too, that the Christian's life here below is a state of warfare, and that no soldier can reasonably expect always to enjoy ease and comfort. Trials and hardships must be encountered, wearisome journeys, cold and hunger must be his portion, and sometimes he must mingle in the fierce and deadly strife and danger of battle. Let then these weak and desponding believers go onward, notwithstanding all their doubts and fears, "looking only" to Jesus the author and finisher of their faith. Though the way may be rough, and the difficulties may be great, and the prospects may be dark, and their spirits may be sad, yet let them hold on to the promise; yes, let them hold on to the promise, diligently using all the means of grace provided in the Church, and all will come right at last; the hills will recede, and the way will become more smooth; the fury of the storm will be hushed, the clouds will disperse, the birds will resume their songs, the fields will look green and gay, and the sun, which had been so long concealed, or faintly seen at intervals, will shine forth in full-orbed glory, and sink to rest without a cloud or speck to dim his disc. God is faithful to his promise; like himself, his promise is the same, "yesterday, to-day, and forever." Hear the exhortation of the pious Prophet of Israel, "who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light; let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God." And hear from the same Prophet, the promise of God, "Fear not, for I am with thee: be not dismayed, for I am thy God; I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

And here, in conclusion, we would remark, that the best remedy for all these doubts and fears, is humble prayer to God. This was the resort of the father of the afflicted child: help, Lord; help thou mine unbelief; and prayer must be our main resource under all the imperfections of our faith.

We should recollect that faith is the gift of God, and we should, therefore, pray to him to bestow upon us that most precious gift. We must ask for the Holy Spirit, "to work in us to will and to do," to enable us to believe, and to take hold of the sweet promises of mercy. And we have every encouragement to pray; for God has promised to hear when we call, and to give when we ask; and especially to "give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him." Let us then day by day lift up our hearts to God; let us pour out to him the wants and sorrows of our souls; let it be our earnest cry that the Lord would help us to believe, that he would give us grace and strength to rise above all our fears, and to claim the Saviour as our personal Friend and Redeemer. Let us "go forward in the strength of the Lord, making mention of his righteousness and of his only," and we shall find to our comfort, that our hearts, so long contracted by doubts and fears, will be relaxed and softened; the affections of our souls will flow out and fasten themselves upon the Saviour; the painful conflict in our bosoms will be terminated; and the blessed, "peace of God which passeth all understanding," will take the place of guilty and accusing fears. We shall thus be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; Christ will dwell in our hearts by faith; being rooted and grounded in love, we shall be able to comprehend with all saints, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, and to be filled with all the fulness of God." Now unto him which is able to do exceedingly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church, by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end.—*Amen.*

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